

# The Problem of Race Classification\*

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The proper study of mankind is man, but we must add, even tho it breaks the beauty of the epigram—if *properly studied*. And no human science comes more under the discount of this reservation than anthropology, of which we may warrantably say that it has yet to establish its basic units and categories. The problem of anthropology today is not the problem of facts but of proper criteria for the facts; the entire scientific status and future of the consideration of man's group characters rests upon a decisive demonstration of what factors are really indicative of race, retrieving the science from the increasing confusion and cross-classification that the arbitrary selection of such criteria has inevitably brought about. The only other alternative is to abandon as altogether unscientific the conception of physical race groups as basic in anthropology; and throw the category of race into the discard as another of the many popular misconceptions detrimentally foisted upon science.

So when we find as pretentious a treatise as Professor Dixon's "The Racial History of Man" prefaced by the declaration: "I have attempted to approach the whole racial problem *de novo*", there arises instantly and pardonably the hope that a Daniel has arisen among anthropologists. Professor Dixon faces the crouching dilemmas of his science squarely, unflinchingly: "The physical anthropologists are not by any means yet agreed as to what are the true criteria of race, and there is considerable doubt as to the real correlation of the various characteristics." And again (p. 87): "The present status of the whole question of race is, therefore, somewhat confused and uncertain. For not only is there wide divergence of opinion between different investigators in regard to the number, distribution, and origin of races, owing to the varying criteria which each adopts, but a certain hesitancy to face the larger problems boldly and without prejudice is apparent." Any attempt, such as this, to be fundamentally critical and at the same time comprehensive is noteworthy in a day when the specialized descriptive monograph seems to have become the refuge of the cautious anthropologist.

Confronting the problem with the confidence of a fresh start, Professor Dixon takes, for better or worse, the path of a "radical simplification of the criteria", relying almost exclusively upon three cranial measurements,—the cephalic, altitudinal, and nasal indices. These he regards most scientific because available to bring into the field of comparison skeletal data of all periods, including prehistoric remains, and because he believes them to be practically unmodifiable by environmental conditions and, therefore, accurately indicative of the racial

heredity. It is only fair to Professor Dixon to state that in terms of the possible variations of these three indices, he constructs eight primary types—combinations, and nineteen cross-blends, which he treats as sufficiently descriptive of the actual combinations of these characters in the individual as to be truly descriptive, even tho arbitrarily and almost mathematically arrived at.

Professor Boas, in a trenchantly severe review of the book,\* has taken exception to these artificial types of Professor Dixon's, and has insisted that as strict median averages, they ignore the Mendelian principles of type variation, and do not fit the most elastic possibilities of racial cross-breeding and intermixture. While recognizing the force of this criticism brought forward by Dr. Boas, the present reviewer is willing to grant Professor Dixon his premises, however contrary to fact, for the sake of what is to be gained from a critical consideration of his conclusions. For an analysis of these brings us to the very crux of the anthropological problem. Moreover, any investigator who attempts a rigorous analysis on a comprehensive scale,—and that Professor Dixon undeniably does,—is entitled to very serious hearing: the ground hypotheses in this science are very much in need of fundamental testing. Indeed Professor Dixon has produced a book to which a majority of his colleagues will take exception, not so much because he challenges on many points the current consensus of anthropological opinion, but because by the rigorousness of his procedure, he has brought the methods of physical anthropology face to face with its crucial dilemmas. If we are not seriously mistaken, the book will have a decided influence, tho a negative one, by serving as a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* test of the purely anatomical approach to the questions of human classification. No book brings us more clearly face to face with the issue between physical and biological anthropology, between the strictly anatomical and the more general morphological approach.

The paradox of Professor Dixon's book is that recognizing so clearly that the criteria of race-type which he chooses cannot be expected to conform with descriptive accuracy to the "natural race-groups", he nevertheless persists in treating them in his conclusions as historical strains or actual races, with definite cultural traits and heredity, and responsible for characteristic effects and influences throughout human history. There is a flagrant inconsistency involved in treating these abstract race-types as equivalent to actual sub-species or natural and cultural race-groups. No one can possibly be cited to better effect against this procedure than Professor Dixon himself. "If by the term 'race' we mean to describe actually existing groups of people, as I think we should, then our types are

\*"The Racial History of Man"—Roland Dixon—Scribner's Sons. Price \$6.00.

\*The New York Times Book Review, April 1, 1923  
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certainly not races, since, with few exceptions, there are no groups of men who actually represent them." These types are "but scantily represented among the world's peoples, the vast majority of whom present not the characteristics of our pure types, but of blends between them." (p. 502). Again, (p. 501): "It is extremely probable that the real criteria of race are rather complex and that various external features of pigmentation, hair-form, etc., together with many structural and metrical factors are involved. . . . In other words, we cannot point to any group of criteria and say these are inherently connected and form a true racial standard." And finally (p. 503): "Moreover, from this point of view a race is not a permanent entity, something static; on the contrary, it is dynamic, and is slowly developing and changing as the result of fresh increments of one or another of its original constituents or of some new one."

Yet having cautioned the reader (p. 401) to regard the terms "Proto-Negroid, Mediterranean, etc., as merely convenient (although perhaps misleading) names for a series of purely arbitrary types which might just as well be denominated by numbers or letters of the alphabet", Professor Dixon in glaring contradiction himself proceeds to treat these same abstract, almost hypothetical, types as "real" races, blithely confident that they have played recognizable historical roles and exhibited characteristic cultural capacities. It is true that he halts himself on the very verge of extreme Nordicism by saying (p. 516) "To no one race or type, however, can the palm be thus arrogantly assigned—rather to the product of the blending of these types which seem of all the most gifted—the Mediterranean-Caspian and the Alpine." And again we read (p. 519): "That neither the Proto-Australoid nor Proto-Negroid peoples by themselves have ever attained to greatness does not mean that they have not contributed anything to the progress of the human race. The elements of both, which seem to have been incorporated into the complex of the Baltic peoples, or in larger measure into that of the population of northern India, doubtless brought qualities the value of which has been considerable, if difficult to analyze and appraise." But from such occasional reefs of resurgent fairness, he plunges headlong into seas of eulogistic appraisal of the "favored races". According to Professor Dixon, the sudden advance in culture which marks the early Dynastic period in Egypt (pp. 186-7) is supposedly due to the leavening influence of the higher cultural capacities of the Mediterranean type; a thin stream of Alpine blood trickling into the Nile Valley, associated with the Caspian, suggests the explanation for the cultural development of the period of the Middle Kingdom, (pp. 188-9) and from that point on, one might imagine the course of civilization to follow in the footsteps of these people. "With strong admixture of Alpine elements we have the development of the great Middle American civilization, and the less ad-

vanced but still striking cultures of the Cliff-Dwelling and Pueblo peoples of the Southwest. In South America, again, it was among peoples primarily of Alpine type that most of the higher cultural developments of Peru took place, the coastal tribes as well as the Inca being of this type." And finally this passage (p. 514 f.) which amounts to a sweepstake claim to civilization: "Thus Babylonian civilization grew out of the blending of the supposedly Alpine Sumerian with the Mediterranean-Caspian Semitic peoples who seem long to have been in occupation of the Mesopotamian plains; in Greece, before the florescence of Hellenic culture, the earlier Mediterranean population was reinforced by the immigration of the probably Alpine Dorians; Rome rose to greatness only after the older Mediterranean-Caspian people of Latium had been half-dominated by Alpines coming southward from the valley of the Po and the region where the older Etruscan culture had its center. In the East, Chinese civilization had its rise in an area where strong Caspian elements were absorbed by the incoming Alpine folk; lastly, the marvellous development of modern European civilization has occurred in that region in which Alpine, Mediterranean and Caspian have been more completely and evenly fused than elsewhere in the world." Thus one more anthropologist goes over to the idols of the tribes. Professor Dixon would have us accept as scientific race-types that in one context are abstract nouns of classification, and in another, represent concrete historical stocks or breeds; that on one hand have no determinable physiognomic or structural stability, and exhibit almost limitless variability of their physical components, yet on the other, maintain sufficiently characteristic cultural traits and capacities as to have everywhere in all environments appreciably similar effects upon civilization. With such types something or someone must be victimized: they breed, so to speak, their own characteristic illusions.

If Professor Dixon had really contemplated from the beginning such conclusions about the cultural role and capacities of races, he should have confronted first the problem,—as anthropology eventually must,—of discovering some criteria of true race, of finding some clue to the inter-connection between physical character, and group-behavior, psychological and cultural traits. Unless this is done,—until this is done, anthropology cannot reliably or warrantably extend its classifications into the field of ethnic differential and cultural characteristics. Or else the heredity formula will have to be abandoned, and anthropologists go over entirely to the ranks of the environmentalists. One need only call attention in this regard to the fact that on Professor Dixon's own criteria and comparison, the relationships of cephalic indices link peoples as different in physiognomic and cultural type as the Proto-Australoid and the Mediterranean—whereas the Proto-Australoid and the Proto-Negroid, linked culturally and geographically, exhibit quite the greatest divergence in cranial indices of any of the eight primary types. So

except as there is some definite clue to the correlation of the many factors in question, there seems no alternative to giving up the concrete descriptive reference of the physical race-types in anthropology, regarding them, as Professor Keller\* suggests, "merely as those imaginary forms about which the peoples of the earth can be assembled with the nearest approach to exhaustiveness, orderliness and sequence." Then for the history of the rise and diffusion of human culture, we would divorce the idea of race in the physical sense from "culture-group" or race with respect to ethnic traits. This independent start on an ethnological and archeological basis would, of course, give us ethnic or culture groups of little or no inherent connection with the physical race-groups. Pretty much this same mode of analysis, making admittedly an exception, Professor Dixon (p. 175 pf.) metes out to the Jews, regarding them more as a culture-group than a race. "It is probable", he says, "that the majority of all the Jews of today are 'Semites' only in speech, and that their true (racial or physical) ancestry goes back not so much to Palestine and Arabia as to the uplands of Anatolia and Armenia, the Caucasus and the steppes of Central Asia—and their nearest relatives are still to be found in those areas today." With wider cultural diversities and relatively more disparate cultural variability, the fallacy of the block conception of race as applied to the Negro peoples is even more unscientific. We cannot change this popular error, at least in respect to physical components, to Professor Dixon, who is never more insistent upon the composite character of living stocks than when dealing with African peoples. But we must point out nevertheless that ethnologically Professor Dixon is not so consistent, but "lumps" this group of peoples unfairly with respect to their cultural capacities and attainments. For the way is very open to this as long as one assumes that blood as mixture acts as a "cultural leaven" and not merely as an activating agent, and that it always works from so-called "higher" to so-called "lower" instead of on a reciprocal basis.

But the prime object of this review is to point out the situation with respect to the fundamental criteria in anthropology, and to call attention to a promising but neglected field, from which may very possibly be wrested a scientific determination of whatever connection may actually exist between these variously disputed basic factors. While the line and field of investigation seem on casual analysis to be of primary concern to the biological school of anthropologists, the results of its thoro-going investigation would be of fundamental importance for the physical anthropologists. Yet both schools have quite abandoned the scientific investigation of the active present-generation inter-breeding of diverse racial stocks, as instanced in the inter-mixture of the Negro with Nordic stocks in America to the unsound charlatan or the casually and exo-

tically curious.\* Meanwhile in what must be pronounced for this very same reason a half-hearted attack on these crucial vital problems, biological anthropologists have resorted from time to time for working hypotheses to the far-fetched field of animal genetics. It is not too much to claim for the field of investigation suggested that there, if anywhere, the problem of the correlation of the physical criteria of races is to be discovered, and perhaps also the main line of evidence for the solution of the question as between the direct and the indirect inheritance of cultural traits.

It is useless to argue that because the scale of ultimate operation is the whole vast range of the life history of the human species, such factors as are admittedly common for both long and short-term change and development cannot be profitably investigated within the restricted field of short-term observation available. Indeed with respect to their morphological connection with one another, and the question of their physiological correlation or independent variability, they can only be approached in this way. Enough evidence has already scientifically gone to waste in seven or eight generations of the history of the Negro stocks in America, to have solved the questions of the relative fixity or variability as well as the determinate correlation of these important moot factors, without a determination of which race classification in anthropology cannot hope to establish itself upon either an exact or a truly descriptive basis.

Intensive anthropometric study of race hybrids, especially of cases where these are widely diverse parental types, is one of the most important of the few research fields that yet remain comparatively untouched. The recent investigations of Frets\*\* of the progeny of parents of sharply contrasted cranial types (dolio and brachycephalic), reported by Dixon as distinctly indicating the development of the meso-cephalic or medial forms, are as a matter of fact highly tentative, and need to be widely supplemented in scope and in the criteria investigated. The advantages of the investigation of a problem of this sort with Negro and non-Negroid stocks, with very evident variation in the correlative factors of skin-pigmentation and hair-texture, ought to be quite apparent. But the possibilities of the field are so intriguing that one may be pardoned for specifying more definitely a few of them: the confirmation or revision of the Frets' hypothesis, the question of the relative variability of head-form, skin-pigmentation and hair-texture, the question whether there are differences in the degree of change or preferential lines of dominant heredity along any of these lines as between the same qualities in the maternal strain or in the paternal strain, and most important of all, extensive and concrete observational investigation of the hypothesis

\*A notable exception in Davenport's "Heredity of Skin Color in Negro-White Crosses." Carnegie Institution Publication No. 188.

\*\*G. Frets: "The Heredity of Human Head Form"—The Hague, 1920.

advanced by Sir Arthur Keith in his "Differentiation of Mankind into Racial Types", that physical anthropological characters and structural changes of the human type are incident upon physiological, especially glandular processes. There is not one of these questions that, in spite of the importance of its being settled, is not yet purely tentative and hypothetical, and yet where the evidence stares, science has looked away. Each generation of science, even our own, has had its characteristic taboos, and this, we fear, has been one of them. So that after all, it is not the interests of the special field, but rather the general interests of anthropology and some of its most comprehensive and basic problems that seem to be here concerned.

One of the very points that must remain purely hypothetical, pending investigation of the sort this article suggests, is a peculiar, almost startling, theory of Professor Dixon's (p. 490) suggesting Negroid and non-Negroid branches of what he regards as essentially the same race-type. A reversible process of "bleaching-out" and "darkening" under pronounced climatic and prolonged dietary change is thus assumed—an assumption natural enough to have been advanced earlier, but as yet scientifically unestablished. "The Palae Alpine type presents us with a problem comparable in many ways to that which we have already met with in the case of the Proto-Negroid type, where a Negroid and a non-Negroid form appear to exist, similar in cranial characteristics, but differing in pigmentation and type of hair. The conditions here are, however, just reversed from those in the Proto-Negroid, for, whereas in that instance the majority of living members of the type are Negroid and the minority non-Negroid in the Palae-Alpine the vast majority present no trace of Negroid pigmentation and hair, these being found only among the numerically insignificant Negrito peoples." While in the particular instance, this hypothesis stands or falls on the confirmation or disproof of Professor Dixon's thesis about the stability of the cranial characters, the suggestion that the progressiveness from blond to brunette coloration have worked in both directions seems in itself to be of greater plausibility than the usual assumption of a one-way process. When we begin once to realize that on the mixing palette of nature, "darkened" white races and "whitened" dark races, the present-day significances of color will have scientifically evaporated.

It is interesting to note in passing that as to a very definite derivation of many of the ele-

ments of the Pre-Columban American cultures together with considerable blood-intermixture from African sources and stocks in Professor Dixon's view, there appears to be conclusive evidence. Thus reinforced from an entirely different line of analysis, the singular coincidence with the conclusions of Professor Leo Wiener, as worked out in his "Discovery of America" on strictly philological evidence and with similar views advanced by Professor G. Elliot Smith in his "Early Migrations of Culture" should shortly have the effect of establishing a consensus of opinion and securing general acceptance of the view. But both the latter investigators are more generous and in all probability more scientific in the interpretation they put upon the situation. Unlike Professor Dixon, they regard cultural contacts of such types as reciprocal in effect and as establishing in the majority of instances a composite culture. But with Professor Dixon, there seems to be an insistent assumption,—which indeed in his conclusions about culture amounts to an underlying fallacy, that the cultural dominant has coincided throughout history with the physical dominant. But surely it ought to be evident that it is not always the race which survives in physical characteristics that has counted most or that survives culturally. This tendency toward identifying cultural aptitudes with ability to survive has constantly to be discounted and combatted.

The feature of the treatise likely to receive most attention from technical anthropologists is the rather unusual position in reverting to the polygenic theory of human origins. The monogenic theory had become so generally held that in this respect the book may not even succeed in effectively re-opening the question. But Professor Dixon has opened more issues than he has closed, and the general effect will be to direct attention to the more fundamental ground questions of anthropology. Like Hume's treatise, the book propounds profounder questions at the end than those it started out to settle, and in this way, perhaps not too intentionally, it may exert a very important influence in current anthropological effort. Certainly the quite successful attempt to restore the comprehensive scope of the classical days of anthropology is to be welcomed, for there are few, perhaps no other, special sciences with so general a bearing and influence. History and the science of human society cannot be put upon a strictly scientific and comparative basis until a sounder and broader anthropology has been achieved.

*Readers of OPPORTUNITY will be pleased to know that Mr. C. M. Battey, one of the foremost photographic artists of this country, will contribute to its pages a series of Art and Negro character studies. One of the latter studies appears on page 272 of this number. The Art Studies subsequently to appear were hung at the International Photographers' Exhibit in Convention Hall, Washington, D. C., July 16-21. Mr. Battey is in charge of the Photographic Division of Tuskegee Institute.—THE EDITOR.*